

SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR THE DYNAMIC RESOLUTION CHANGE FOR VIDEO ENCODING

Field of the Invention

[0001] The present invention relates to digital video encoding generally, and more particularly to digital video encoding in which dynamic resolution switching is used to predictively encode a digital video bitstream.

Background of the Invention

[0002] Video encoding algorithms are typically constrained in the total bitrate allowed (as is the case for variable bitrate video) or in the average bitrate allowed (constant bitrate video) for encoding the video stream. Thus, a video encoder cannot use a large number of bits (i.e. appreciably larger than the average bitrate) to encode each of a long sequence of successive frames. For example, for the case of constant bitrate video, a finite buffer, present at the decoder, is used to store encoded frames before they are displayed. In this case, the maximum number of bits that can be used to encode the current frame is bounded. This is because if a frame uses too many bits the decoder buffers can underflow, leading to a situation where the decoder has to delay or drop future frames.

[0003] The encoder controls the number of bits used to encode a frame by appropriately selecting encoding parameters such as the quantization scale. If the number of bits available for encoding the current frame is low, the encoder uses a high quantization scale to reduce the bitrate used for encoding the frame. However, if too high a quantization scale is used to encode a frame unnatural artifacts appear when the frame is reconstructed at the decoder. Depending on the magnitude of the quantization scale used, these artifacts may cause an appreciable loss in the perceived quality of the video stream.

[0004] Dynamically reduced resolution can be used, as an alternative to using a high quantization scale, to lower the number of bits used to encode a frame. Reduction in the resolution of a frame prior to encoding (termed reduced resolution mode encoding) allows the frame to be encoded in a lesser number of bits as compared to the original. The MPEG-4 video standard, for example, provides a reduced resolution mode, which can be used to encode video frames at a low bitrate.

[0005] Encoding at a reduced resolution is preferable to encoding at a very high quantization scale, from the point of view of perceptual quality of the reconstructed video frame. The reason being is that encoding at a reduced resolution causes uniform blurring as opposed to the characteristic blocky artifacts caused by encoding at too high a quantization scale. However, deciding when to encode at reduced resolution is not straightforward. Often, encoding at moderately high quantization scales may produce reconstructions of better quality than if reduced resolution were used. This is especially true when the spatial and temporal complexity of the frame is not high enough to mask the effects of reduced resolution. Thus, it is inadvisable to encode frame sequences with little motion at low resolution.

[0006] Another significant issue is that of the temporal distortion caused by encoding successive frames at different resolutions. Repeatedly switching resolution modes is inadvisable, it may be better to use the same resolution mode as preceding frames even if it provides inferior reconstruction for the frame on a stand-alone basis. It is therefore imperative that any resolution selection method ensures that reduced resolution is only used when it can be suitably masked and that resolution modes do not switch repeatedly in a short duration.

[0007] An example of an encoding method aimed at selection of a judicious resolution mode for encoding a particular image in a sequence of images is disclosed in United States Patent Number **5262855**. In this prior-art system (Figure 1), the encoder encodes a frame at a lower resolution if it detects complex motion, fade and dissolve conditions, high quantization scale or high estimated decoding time. The prior-art system suffers from the following limitations: It switches to a reduced resolution mode if any one of the above-mentioned conditions occurs. Hence the presence of fast motion in the video

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stream would cause the encoder to switch to low resolution even if the decoder buffer level is high (for the case of constant bitrate video discussed above). Thus, considering the above conditions individually in selecting the resolution, this technique is not adequate because a function that embodies a combination of the above conditions is required. A second limitation of the above-mentioned system is that it does not address the problem of temporal distortion caused by switches in the encoding resolution. Since the system does not take the resolution mode history of previous frames into account, there is a significant possibility that the encoder may oscillate between different resolution modes.

[0008] An example of an encoding apparatus aimed at the design of a resolution selection controller is disclosed in United States Patent Number **5805222**. In this prior art system, the quantizer step size, amount of data coded and buffer occupancy of a previous frame are employed to select the resolution of the current frame being encoded. However, this system has the following limitations: The prior-art system uses statistical information from only one previous frame to make the resolution selection decision. However, it is known that accurate estimation of statistical information of a video bitstream requires incorporation of statistics over a plurality of frames. Estimating such information from just one previous frame is liable to be inaccurate since video frames typically exhibit diverse statistical behavior. Further, many video effects such as gradual scene changes, which have important ramifications on the encoding resolution selected, can only be detected by studying the statistical behavior over several successive frames.

[0009] Further, the prior-art system embodied in United States Patent Number **5805222** (as illustrated in Figure 2) does not consider the amount of motion present, while selecting the encoding resolution. The encoding resolution selected should depend on the presence (or absence) of motion, since motion effectively masks the blurring distortion present in low resolution video. In the absence of motion, it is advisable to avoid coding at low resolution, since it causes visually perceptible distortion. The prior-art system uses the amount of coded data, in lieu of a motion estimate, in selecting the encoding resolution. However the amount of coded data is a poor estimate of motion. For example, a frame in a still scene may, nevertheless, have a large amount of coded data, if

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the immediately prior frame (with respect to which the current frame is predictively encoded) was coded poorly. Thus the prior-art system may code low motion sequences at low resolution causing appreciable distortion.

[0010] When the statistical information of the current (and future) frames is not considered, the system is vulnerable to estimation errors. This occurs, for example, when the current frame marks a scene change. When the current and previous frames belong to different scenes, the statistical behavior of the previous frame is not a good indicator of the advisability of encoding the current frame in low resolution mode. Certain encoding algorithms employ a look-ahead estimation of the statistics of future frames, which may be used to circumvent the described problem. Further disclosed in the prior art is a function of a product of the amount of data being coded, wherein the quantization scale is used to switch from high resolution mode to low resolution mode as well as from low resolution mode to high resolution mode with different preset thresholds. However, the use of the same function for both modal resolution decisions is not adequate.

[0011] The switch from high resolution to low resolution mode should be done when the number of bits available for encoding the current and future frames is low. On the other hand, the switch from low resolution back to high resolution mode should be done only when there is certainty that this switch will not cause reversion to low resolution mode immediately in the future. Thus the objective functions used to make the decisions need to be significantly different. For example, additional parameters such as the scene-change history need to be considered when switching from low resolution to high resolution mode.

[0012] It is an object of the present invention to provide an improved method for dynamic resolution switching which uses an estimate of the motion to provide distortion masking and which avoids the problems of inaccurate statistical estimation and repeated switching of resolution modes. It is a further object of the present invention to provide an improved coding method, which determines encoding parameters after taking into account the resolution of the current and previous frames being encoded.

Summary of the Invention

[0013] The present invention relates to a method, system and computer program product for the predictive encoding of a digital video bitstream by the use of dynamic resolution switching to ensure a good quality video reconstruction. Resolution switching, as the name suggests, implies changing the resolution of the output encoded video bitstream. Resolution change is provided by encoding the current frame at high resolution if the preceding frames were encoded at low resolution, or encoding the current frame at low resolution if the preceding frames were encoded at high resolution.

[0014] An embodiment of the present invention relates to a method for predictively encoding digital video sequences, wherein the method comprises the step of dynamically selecting the resolution of a current frame being encoded, the selection being based on statistical and coding information of a plurality of frames. Further, the selection step includes analyzing the statistical and coding information from at least one previous frame and the current frame, the statistical information including scene-change information and estimated motion information, and the coding information including a measure of the quantization used by the frames and a measure of the availability of bits. The method further comprises the step of selecting encoding parameters and encoding a current frame at a chosen resolution, wherein the selection procedure takes into account the output of the dynamic resolution selection step in determining the encoding parameters.

[0015] A further embodiment of the present invention relates to a system for the predictive encoding of digital video sequences. The system comprises a dynamic resolution switch controller means for the dynamic selection of the resolution of a current frame being encoded, wherein the selection is based on the statistical and coding information of a plurality of frames. Additionally included in the resolution analyses is the statistical and coding data from at least one previous frame and the current frame, the statistical information including scene-change information and estimated motion information, and the coding information including a measure of the quantization used by the frames and a measure of the availability of bits. Further, the system comprises a coder means for the selection of encoding parameters and encoding of a current frame at

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a chosen resolution, the coder means taking into account the output of the dynamic resolution switch controller means in determining the encoding parameters.

[0016] A yet further embodiment of the present invention relates to a computer program product for predictively encoding digital video sequences, comprising a computer-usable medium carrying thereon a means for dynamically selecting the resolution of the current frame being encoded, the selection being based on the statistical and coding information of a plurality of frames, including at least one previous frame and the current frame. The statistical information includes scene-change information and estimated motion information; the coding information additionally includes a measure of the quantization used by the frames and a measure of the availability of bits. Further, the computer program product comprises a means for selecting encoding parameters and encoding a current frame at a chosen resolution, the means taking into account the output of the means for dynamically selecting the resolution of the current frame being encoded in determining the encoding parameters.

[0017] Additional embodiments of the present invention may utilize coding information that includes a measure of the quantization used by the frames and a measure of the availability of bits, wherein the statistical and coding information is generated by a previous run of a coder means.

[0018] The objects, advantages and features of the present invention will become more apparent when reference is made to the following description taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings.

Brief Description of the Figures

[0019] The accompanying drawings illustrate one or more embodiments of the invention and, together with the written description, serve to explain the principles of the invention. Wherever possible, the same reference numbers are used throughout the drawings to refer to the same or like elements of an embodiment, and wherein:

[0020] Figure 1 is a diagram illustrating a prior-art encoding system for the selection of a resolution mode for encoding a particular image in a sequence of images.

[0021] Figure 2 is a diagram illustrating a prior-art encoding system for the selection of a resolution mode for encoding a particular frame in a digital video.

[0022] Figure 3 is a diagram illustrating an embodiment of a system of the present invention.

[0023] Figure 3A is a flow diagram illustrating a method for predictively encoding digital video sequences.

[0024] Figure 4 is a diagram illustrating the operation of an embodiment of the resolution switch controller.

[0025] Figure 5 is a flow diagram illustrating the operation of an embodiment of the frame statistic computer.

[0026] Figure 6 is a flow diagram illustrating the operation of an embodiment of the frame statistic gatherer.

Detailed Description

[0027] Embodiments of the invention are described below in detail. The disclosed embodiments are intended to be illustrative only, since numerous modifications and variations therein will be apparent to those of ordinary skill in the art. In reference to the drawings, like numbers will indicate like parts continuously throughout the views.

[0028] The present invention is initially described in reference to Figure 3. An exemplary embodiment of the present invention relates to a system for the predictive encoding of digital video sequences 300. The system 300 comprises a dynamic resolution switch controller means 10 for the dynamic selection of the resolution of a current frame being encoded, wherein the selection is based on the statistical and coding information of a plurality of frames. The current frame refers to the frame which is to be encoded next, that is, the frame whose encoding parameters are being determined at the current time interval.

[0029] Additionally included in the resolution analyses is the statistical and coding data from at least one previous frame and the current frame, the statistical information including scene-change information and estimated motion information, and the coding information including a measure of the quantization used by the frames and a

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measure of the availability of bits. Further, the system 300 comprises a coder means 30 for the selection of encoding parameters and encoding of a current frame at a chosen resolution, the coder means taking into account the output of the dynamic resolution switch controller means 10 in determining the encoding parameters.

[0030] The resolution switch controller means 10 uses one of two different methods to determine when the resolution of the output encoded video bitstream should be switched, depending on the resolution at which the video is being presently encoded. The critical factors in determining when to switch from high resolution to low resolution include the availability of bits (or the likelihood of decoder buffer underflow in the case of constant bitrate video), the expected magnitude of quantization scale required to prevent the overflow and the amount of motion present that can provide distortion masking for low resolution encoded video frames.

[0031] The critical factors in determining when to switch from low resolution to high resolution include the amount of masking motion present, the expected value of quantization scale if such a switch is made and the likelihood of oscillation if such a switch is made, that is, the likelihood that such a switch will need to be followed by reversion to low resolution mode in the near future. The likelihood of oscillation, in turn, depends on the decoder buffer level and the scene change statistics of the preceding frames. Accordingly, the different methods for resolution switching use the above-mentioned criteria as a basis for determining the resolution required for encoding, depending on whether the current resolution mode is high resolution mode or low resolution mode.

[0032] The presently described exemplary embodiment further provides for the regulation of the encoding parameters used by the coder means 30, based on the output of the resolution switch controller means 10. In particular, when the resolution switch controller means 10 determines a switch in resolution is required, the current frame is encoded as a scene change frame, inasmuch as non-predictive coding of the frame is favored over predictive coding. Further, the statistics of the current frame are assumed to be significantly different from the statistics of the preceding frames, and the quantization scale and bitrate allocated to the frame are accordingly computed. Further, the

quantization scale and the bitrate allocated to the frame are lesser than the corresponding allocations to a 'true' scene change frame, that is, a scene change that is not caused by a resolution switch.

[0033] The embodiment of Figure 3 additionally features a current frame extractor means 70 which extracts the current frame to be encoded from the input digital video. The output S1 of the means is applied to the frame statistics computer means 80 that computes the statistics of the current frame, including inter-pixel difference, the predicted quantization scale, and the motion estimate.

[0034] The frame statistics computer means 80 determines if the current frame is suitably different from the previous frame as to mark a scene change. To enable the determination, the frame buffer means 90 stores one or more preceding frames and the output signal S2 of the frame buffer means 90 is applied to the frame statistics computer means 80.

[0035] The frame statistic gatherer means 50 gathers the statistics of a plurality of preceding frames. The statistics include the motion estimates, the decoder buffer level, the inter-pixel differences and the quantization scales used for encoding a plurality of preceding frames. The input signals applied to the frame statistics gatherer means 50 include the output signal S7 from the delay latch means 95, the output signal S4 from the resolution statistics gatherer means 40, and the output signal S5 from the coder means 30.

[0036] The output signal S7 is generated by delaying the output signal S3 from frame statistics computer means 80 by the duration of one frame. The signal S3 carries statistics from frame statistics computer means 80, including the motion estimate of the current frame and the value of the inter-pixel difference for the current frame. The aforementioned output signal S4 carries the resolution statistics gathered by the resolution statistics gatherer means 40, including the resolutions at which a plurality of preceding frames was encoded. The output signal S5 carries the coded statistics from the coder means 30 including the quantization scales used to encode a plurality of preceding frames and the decoder buffer level. The scene-change history buffer means 60 stores the frame numbers for a plurality of preceding frames which marked scene changes. The output signal S6 from frame statistics computer means 80 carries the scene change

information for the current frame. The output signal **S6** is applied to the delay latch means **95**, and the resultant delayed output signal **S8** is applied to the scene-change history buffer means **60**.

[0037] As described above, the resolution switch controller means **10** selects the resolution at which the current video frame should be encoded. The inputs applied to the resolution switch controller means **10** are the output signal **S9** from the frame statistic gatherer means **50**, the output signal **S10** from the scene-change history buffer means **60** and the output signal **S11** from the frame statistics computer means **80**. The fore mentioned output signal **S9** carries the statistics for a plurality of preceding frames, including motion estimates, quantization scales used for encoding, resolution statistics and the decoder buffer level. The output signal **S10** carries the scene-change statistics, namely the frame numbers at which preceding scene-changes occurred.

[0038] In an exemplary embodiment the output signal **S10** may simply carry the frame number at which the immediately preceding scene-change occurred (or equivalently, the frame number at which the current scene started). In an alternative embodiment, the signal may contain information about multiple preceding scene-changes, such that gradual scene-change effects (such as wipes and fades) can be detected and used by the resolution switch controller. The output signal **S11** carries the frame statistics for the current frame from the frame statistics computer means **80**, including the motion estimate and the predicted quantization scale for the current frame. The statistical information contained in signal **S11** differs from that in signal **S9**, in that signal **S11** contains statistical information for the current frame. Since the frame statistics gatherer means **50** only receives the current frame statistical information (via signal **S7**) after the delay of one frame duration (which delay is induced by the delay latch means **95**), signal **S9** only contains statistical information for preceding frames.

[0039] On the basis of the abovementioned-received statistics, the resolution switch controller **10** determines the advisability of switching the resolution (from high to low resolution, or from low to high resolution) of the output encoded video stream. The decision of the resolution switch controller **10** is communicated via output signal **S12** to the resolution reduction means **20**, the coder means **30** and the resolution statistic

gatherer means 40. In the event that the output video stream has to be encoded at a low resolution, the resolution reduction means 20 reduces the resolution of the current frame through a process of filtering and sub-sampling. An exemplary embodiment of the process is to use an $n \times n$ averaging mask (where n is a constant integer) at each pixel of the current frame and to then down-sample the resultant frame by a factor of n in both vertical and horizontal dimensions.

[0040] Resolution reduction is required in two cases. The first case is when the immediately preceding frame was encoded at a low resolution and the resolution switch controller determines that a resolution switch is not required. The second case is when the immediately preceding frame was encoded at a high resolution and the resolution switch controller determines that a resolution switch is required. In the case when the current frame is to be encoded at its original resolution, the resolution reduction means 20 simply allows the frame to pass through unchanged.

[0041] The coder means 30 determines the parameters to be used in encoding the current frame, including the quantization scales, and performs the actual encoding of the frame. The input signals applied to the means are the output signal S12 from the resolution switch controller 10, the output signal S13 from frame statistics gatherer means 50, the output signal S15 from resolution reduction means 20 and the output signal S14 from the frame statistics computer means 80. The aforementioned output signal S12 contains the resolution switch decision determined by the resolution switch controller 10.

[0042] As mentioned before, it is significant if the difference in the statistics of frames are at different resolutions (even if the frames are otherwise similar), hence if the resolution of the current frame is different from the immediately preceding frame the coding means should make suitable selections of the encoding parameters. An exemplary embodiment of the selection is to consider a resolution switch to be a 'resolution scene-change', and to code the current frame non-predictively in the above scenario.

[0043] Further, since the 'resolution scene-change' may not be a 'true' scene change (in that the frames may be similar at their original resolutions), the bit allocation and the quantizer scale selection should be lower than the corresponding selections in the event of a 'true' scene-change (that is, a scene change not caused by a change in

resolution). The dependence of the coding means on the resolution switch decision is an important advantage of the present invention.

[0044] The output signal **S13** carries the statistical information of a plurality of preceding frames from the frame statistics gatherer means **50**. The aforementioned output signal **S15** carries the frame output of the resolution reduction means **20**, this may either be the original current frame or it may be the current frame at a reduced resolution. The aforementioned output signal **S14** carries the statistical information of the current frame from the frame statistics computer means **80**. The coder means **30** makes a prudent selection of the encoding parameters by utilizing the information contained in the above signals and then encodes the current frames using the encoding parameters. The output of the coder means **30** is the encoded digital video bitstream.

[0045] Figure 3A illustrates a further embodiment of the present invention that relates to a method for predictively encoding digital video sequences, wherein the method comprises the step **302** of dynamically selecting the resolution of a current frame being encoded, the selection being based on statistical and coding information of a plurality of frames. Further, the selection step includes analyzing the statistical and coding information from at least one previous frame and the current frame, the statistical information including scene-change information and estimated motion information, and the coding information including a measure of the quantization used by the frames and a measure of the availability of bits. The method further comprises the step **304** of selecting encoding parameters and at step **306** encoding a current frame at a chosen resolution, wherein the selection procedure takes into account the output of the dynamic resolution selection step in determining the encoding parameters. Finally, a step **308** the method outputs an encoded digital video bitstream.

[0046] A yet further embodiment of the present invention relates to a computer program product for predictively encoding digital video sequences, comprising a computer-usable medium carrying thereon the means for dynamically selecting the resolution of the current frame being encoded, the selection being based on the statistical and coding information of a plurality of frames, including at least one previous frame and the current frame. The statistical information includes scene-change information and

estimated motion information, wherein, the coding information includes a measure of the quantization used by the frames and a measure of the availability of bits. Further, the computer program product comprises a means for selecting encoding parameters and encoding a current frame at a chosen resolution, the means taking into account the output of the means for dynamically selecting the resolution of the current frame being encoded in determining the encoding parameters.

[0047] Figure 4 illustrates an exemplary embodiment of the resolution switch controller **10** that may be utilized within the present invention. The input signals and statistics utilized by the resolution switch controller **10** for determining whether a switch in resolution is required, in the preferred embodiment are as follows: Input signal **S100** carries the predicted value of the quantization scale for the current frame from the frame statistics computer **80**. The signal **S101** carries a value, from the frame statistic gatherer **50**, which is a measure of the quantization scales used to encode a plurality of preceding frames. For example, the value can be generated by computing a rolling average of the quantization scales used to encode the preceding frames. Signal **S102** carries a value, from the frame statistic gatherer **50**, which is a measure of the amount of motion in a plurality of preceding frames. The value can be generated by computing a function dependent on the rolling average of the motion vector magnitudes and the energy of the residual obtained by differencing each frame from the motion compensated previous frame. Signal **S103** carries information regarding the decoder buffer level, from the frame statistic gatherer **50**. Signal **S104** carries an estimate of the motion in the current frame, from the frame statistic computer **80**. Signal **S105** carries the frame numbers of one or more preceding frames which marked scene-changes, wherein the frame-number of only that frame which marked the latest scene-change is used. Signal **S106** carries the frame number of the current frame. Signal **S107** is a binary signal, which is set high if the current frame number is equal to one and is set low otherwise. The signals **S106** and **S107** can be generated by the frame statistic computer **80**. The signals **S106** and **S107** can also be generated by a separate frame counter. Signal **S108** is a binary signal, which is set high if the resolution used to encode the immediately preceding frame was high and is

set low otherwise. In the present embodiment, signal **S108** is generated by the resolution statistics gatherer **40**.

[0048] The input binary signal **S107** is applied to the multiplexer **120** to select between signals **S100** and **S101**. Thus if the frame number of the current frame is equal to 1, that is, if the current frame is the first frame being encoded, the output signal **S111** of the multiplexer **120** is set to the predicted quantizer scale value signal **S100**. If the predicted quantizer scale value for the first frame is inordinately high, it may be anticipated that the coding complexity of the video will be high, and hence it is better to start coding at a low resolution. This solves the problem created by not having a statistical history to refer to, while coding the first frame. If the current frame is not the first frame being encoded the output of the multiplexer **120** is set to the value signal **S101**, which is computed on the basis of the quantization scale values of a plurality of preceding frames.

[0049] The input signals **S102** and **S104** are applied to the motion computer **140**. The motion computer **140** combines the values carried by signal **S102** (motion estimate of preceding frames) and signal **S104** (motion estimate of current frame) and generates a new motion estimate, which thereby combines the motion estimates of the preceding frames as well as the current frame. Since the new motion estimate takes the motion of the current frame into account, it is more representative of the current motion characteristics of the video sequence than a measure based only on preceding frames. At the same time, since the estimate also takes into account the motion statistics of a plurality of preceding frames, it is less likely to be rendered inaccurate by short-lived temporal disturbances (such as random noise) in the video stream. The motion estimate is carried by output signal **S110**.

[0050] The high-to-low switch controller **100** implements the decision of switching the resolution from high resolution to low resolution. In the preferred embodiment the high-to-low switch controller **100** consists of three comparators **101**, **102** and **103**, as shown in Figure 4, AND gate **104** and the OR gate **105**. The inputs to the high-to-low switch controller **100** are the signals **S111**, **S103** and **S110**. The comparator **101** compares the quantization scale estimate **Q**, available on signal **S111**, to a

predetermined threshold T_Q and its output is set high if $Q > T_Q$. The comparator **102** compares the motion estimate M , available on signal **S110**, to a predetermined threshold T_M and its output is set high if $M > T_M$. The comparator **103** compares the decoder buffer level B_{dec} , available on signal **S103**, to a predetermined threshold T_B and its output is set high if $B_{dec} < T_B$. The outputs of comparators **101** and **102** are passed through the AND gate **104** and the result is ORed with the output of comparator **103**. The output signal **S120** of the OR gate **105** signifies the decision taken by the high-to-low switch controller. If the output is high, the resolution should be switched from high resolution to low resolution. Thus, in the preferred embodiment the high-to-low switch controller implements the following criterion switch from high resolution to low resolution if the following condition C_1 evaluates to true.

$$C_1 = \{ \{Q > T_Q\} \&\& \{M > T_M\} \} \text{ II } \{B_{dec} < T_B\}$$

[0051] C_1 will be true if either the decoder buffer level is dangerously low or if both the quantization scale and the amount of motion are high. This reflects the relationship between quantization distortion (caused by encoding at high quantization scale), blurring distortion (caused by encoding at low resolution) and motion-blurring distortion is preferable to quantization distortion if the motion is high enough to mask the effects of blurring distortion.

[0052] Hence, if the quantization distortion is very high, it is advisable to switch to low resolution but only if the amount of motion is high enough to mask the resultant blurring distortion. However, in the event that the decoder buffer level is very low, it is better to switch to low resolution regardless of the motion and quantization, since a decoder buffer underflow causes far more severe distortion effects than either of the abovementioned distortions.

[0053] The low-to-high switch controller **110** implements the decision of switching the resolution from low resolution to high resolution. The low-to-high switch controller **110** consists of three comparators **111**, **112** and **113** and the AND gate **114**.

The inputs to the low-to-high switch controller **110** are the signals **S111**, **S103**, **S105**, **S106** and **S110**. The comparator **111** computes the function $Q.M^2$, where Q and M are as aforementioned, and compares the value of this function to a preset threshold T_{QM} and sets its output high if $Q.M^2 < T_{QM}$. The comparator **112** compares the current frame number, which information is available on **S106**, with the frame number at which the last scene change occurred, which information is available on **S105**. The output of the comparator **112** is set high if $F_{curr} - F_{sc} > T_{sc}$, where F_{curr} refers to the frame number of the current frame, F_{sc} refers to the frame number at which the last scene change occurred and T_{sc} refers to a fixed preset threshold. The comparator **113** compares the decoder buffer level B_{dec} , available on **S103**, to a predetermined threshold T_{B2} and its output is set high if $B_{dec} > T_{B2}$. The outputs of comparators **111**, **112** and **113** are passed through the AND gate **114**. The output **S121** of gate **114** signifies the decision taken by the low-to-high switch controller **110**. If the output is high, the resolution is to be switched from low resolution to high resolution. The low-to-high switch controller **110** implements a switch from low resolution to high resolution if the following condition C_2 evaluates to true.

$$C_2 = \{Q.M^2 > T_{QM}\} \&\& \{B_{dec} > T_{B2}\} \&\& \{F_{curr} - F_{sc} > T_{sc}\}$$

[0054] C_2 is a significantly different criterion from C_1 . As noted before, this is because the motivation for switching from low-resolution to high-resolution mode fundamentally differs from the motivation for doing the inverse operation. When deciding to switch from low-resolution to high resolution mode, it is of primary importance to ensure that a persistent high-resolution mode will be achieved so that subsequently it will not be required to revert back to low-resolution mode. Hence, the decision is only taken if every individual statistic considered indicates that encoding in high-resolution mode can be sustained, at least for the foreseeable future. A low value of the function $Q.M^2$ indicates that the quantization scale and motion estimates are both low.

[0055] Low values of the statistics indicate that it is preferable to coding at high resolution. The reason $Q.M^2$ is preferred to the product $Q.M$ is that the motion estimate is typically found to be a more reliable and accurate parameter on which to base a

resolution switch decision. A high value of B_{dec} indicates that the decoder buffer level is sufficiently high, such that coding at high resolution will not deplete the decoder buffer level to dangerously low levels in the near future. Finally, a high value of $F_{curr} - F_{sc}$ indicates that a sufficient amount of time has passed since the last scene change.

[0056] This is required because gradual scene-changes often occur over several frames and the frames typically require a large amount of bits to encode. As such, it is inadvisable to switch out of low-resolution mode during the frames, because of the danger of quick reversion back to low-resolution mode. The condition C_2 therefore requires that the product $Q.M^2$ be low and that the decoder buffer level be sufficiently high and that a sufficient amount of time have elapsed since the last scene-change occurred. By themselves, any one of the three comparisons is not enough to ensure persistence of a high-resolution mode if a switch is effected. However, if all three comparisons hold, it is reasonable assumption that a persistent high-resolution mode can be achieved if a switch is effected.

[0057] The signals **S120** and **S121** are applied to the multiplexer **130**, which is controlled by the binary input signal **S108**. When **S108** set high, that is if the resolution used to encode the immediately preceding frame was high, then the signal **S120** appears on the output **S122** of the multiplexer **130**.

[0058] Conversely when **S108** is set low, that is if the resolution used to encode the immediately preceding frame was low, then the signal **S121** appears on the output of the multiplexer **130**. The output **S122** is the final output of the resolution switch controller **10**. When the output is high the resolution at which the video stream is being encoded is to be switched, that is, if the resolution of the preceding frame was high, then the resolution of the current frame will be low and vice versa.

[0059] Figure 5 shows an exemplary embodiment of the frame statistic computer means **80**. The inputs applied to the frame statistic computer means **80** are the input signals **S200** and **S201**. The input signal **S200** carries the current frame from the current frame extractor means **70**. The input signal **S201** carries a previous frame from the frame buffer means **90**. The exemplary embodiment of the frame statistic computer means **80** incorporates a scene change detector means **200** to which the signals **S200** and **S201** are

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applied. The scene change detector means **200** determines if the current frame marks a scene-change by comparing its statistics, including the frame mean and inter-pixel difference, to the corresponding statistics of the previous frame.

[0060] The output **S210** of the scene change detector means **200** is applied to the scene-change history buffer **60** and the coder means **30**. The embodiment of the frame statistic computer **80** further incorporates a motion estimator means **210** to which the signals **S200** and **S201** are applied. The motion estimator means **210** computes an estimate of the motion between the previous frame and the current frame by examining motion statistics including the energy of the motion-compensated residual. The output **S210** of the motion estimator means **210** is applied to the resolution switch controller means **10** and the frame statistic gatherer means **50**. The frame statistic computer **80** further incorporates a quantization scale predictor means **220** to which the signals **S200** and **S201** are applied. The quantization scale predictor means **220** estimates the expected quantization scale that will be needed to code the current frame, which estimate is based on current and previous frame statistics, including the frame complexity of the previous and current frames and the number of bits required to code the previous frame. The estimate is output via signal **S212** and is applied to the resolution switch controller **10** to be used in determining the encoding resolution as discussed above.

[0061] The frame statistic computer **80** further incorporates an inter-pixel difference computer means **230** to which the signal **S200** is applied. The inter-pixel difference computer means **230** computes the average inter-pixel difference for the current frame and outputs the statistic via signal **S213** to the coder means **30** and the frame statistic gatherer means **50**.

[0062] As an alternative, the exemplary embodiment can utilize the statistics of a plurality of previous frames (wherein the statistics are available at the frame statistic gatherer) to estimate the predicted quantization scale and implement the scene-change detection. In addition, the alternative embodiment can compute additional statistics, including the variance of the current frame, and transmit these statistics to the coder means **30** and the resolution switch controller **10** for utilization in encoding.

[0063] Figure 6 shows an exemplary embodiment of the frame statistic gatherer means 50. Prior to encoding the current frame, the frame statistics of the frame are carried to a delay latch, which delays the statistics by one frame duration before transmitting them to the frame statistic gatherer means 50. Further, immediately after the current frame has been encoded the encoding parameters of the frame are applied directly to the frame statistic gatherer means 50. This is done immediately prior to encoding the next frame. Hence, the input signals to the frame statistic gatherer means 50 carry information about the frame statistics and the encoding parameters of the last encoded frame.

[0064] The statistical information is processed by the frame statistics gatherer 50 and is transmitted to the resolution switch controller 10 and the coder means 30 to be used as *a-priori* information in determining the encoding resolution and encoding parameters. In the exemplary embodiment, the input to the frame statistic gatherer means 50 are the input signals S300, S301, S302, S303 and S304. Signal S300 carries information on the resolution at which the previous frame was encoded. This information is generated by the resolution statistics gatherer means 40. Signals S301 and S303 carry information on the motion estimate of the previous frame and the mean inter-pixel difference of the previous frame respectively. Both these signals are originally generated by the frame statistic computer and pass through the delay latch before being applied to the statistic gatherer. The motion information carried on S301 is utilized by the rolling motion average means 310 to generate a new value of the rolling motion average.

[0065] Finally, signals S302 and S304 carry information about the encoding parameters used to encode the last encoded frame, namely the average quantization scale used to encode the frame and the number of bits used to encode the frame respectively. The signals are generated by the coder means 30 and are directly applied to the frame statistics gatherer 50. The information on the signal S302 is used to compute a new value of the rolling average by the rolling Q average means 320. The information on the signal S304 is used to compute the new decoder buffer level by the buffer level means 340.

[0066] It will be apparent to those skilled in the art that various modifications and variations can be made in the present invention without departing from the scope or spirit
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of the invention. Other embodiments of the invention will be apparent to those skilled in the art from consideration of the specification and practice of the invention disclosed herein. It is intended that the specification and examples be considered as exemplary only, with a true scope and spirit of the invention being indicated by the following claims.